DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 130 368 CS 501 539

AUTHOR Goodyear, F. H.; Behnke, Ralph R.
TITLE The Oral Examination in Educational Evaluation.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 12p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Evaluation Methods; Higher Education; *Oral Communication; *Oral Expression; Secondary Education; *Student Evaluation; *Test Construction; Testing Problems; Test Reviews; Test Validity
IDENTIFIERS *Oral Examinations

ABSTRACT

Arguments for and against the use of an oral examination as part of the evaluation process are reviewed and found to rely on the experience of practitioners rather than on empirical research. Several alternatives to the traditional oral examination are discussed as ways to increase the validity of educational evaluations. (AA)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED130368

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

THE ORAL EXAMINATION IN EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION

F.H. Goodyear

Ralph R. Behnke

Mr. Goodyear is Associate Professor of Communication at Madison College. Mr. Behnke is Professor and Chairman of Speech Communication at Texas Christian University.

CS 501 539

THE ORAL EXAMINATION IN EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION

The oral examination, an important and potentially useful evaluation instrument, is, at present, used primarily in graduate instruction. Although oral tests are sometimes maligned by educators, research evidence indicates that they are probably as valid and reliable as other testing techniques. The authors present several innovative formats and urge their implementation at a variety of educational levels. Discussed are the use of student panels, group oral testing, and the use of multi-mediated case analysis techniques.

Despite their apparent respectability and widespread usage, oral examinations have been the subject of only sporadic and sometimes superficial investigation. Their evaluation, for the most part, has been undertaken by educational technologists rather than by speech teachers and scholars. However, oral examinations can provide important and useful information about a student's level of knowledge difficult to obtain through other testing modes. Ideally then, speech communication educators should become actively involved in the problems of developing systematic, comprehensive, and creative approaches to applying the oral mode to the testing process. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the oral examination process and to suggest improvements and innovations potentially useful in speech communication instruction.

ATTITUDES TOWARD ORAL TESTING

The literature on evaluating educational outcomes by oral examinations contains a substantial number of negative opinions. In 1929, Ruch offered several fundamental criticisms of oral testing based upon the writings of Horace Mann.[1] Beyond his opinion that oral examinations were not "economical of time" he contended that they "tend to be unsystematic, and to be deflected from the aim of

the examiner by unforseen circumstances." Moreover, he contended that the oral format produced a "greater tendency to emotional disturbances as compared with written tests."[2] About the same date, Pressey, Pressey, and Barnes declared that "oral examinations are distinctly unreliable--so unreliable that use of such a method in deciding the educational fate of a student would seem a matter for thoughtful consideration."[3]

More recently, Smith and Adams assert that oral examinations do not measure what they are supposed to measure:

> A student might know the subject matter to perfection but become excited over the type of test and fail completely. Regardless of the objectives of teaching, such a test is essentially a measure of poise, which probably was not one of the objectives at all.[4]

Heiss indicts oral examinations because students have "...few formal opportunities to express themselves orally and are more uncomfortable when required to do so." She contends that, "For those who have little talent for verbalizing, the experience is often stressful."[5] In a very harsh indictment, Johnson characterizes the oral examination for the master's degree as either a final hurdle or merely protocol.[6] Halio also launches a strong attack on oral testing, "What happens then is that it quietly degenerates into a mere test of the student's capacity to memorize details and his mental agility or deftness in parrying questions...."[7] Finally, in an article published in the American Journal of Physics, Platt raises what might seem to be every possible objection to the oral mode of examination, contending that it:

> ...is necessarily variable from student to student....is unfair and uneven...,introduces uncontrollable biases in judgment....is the hardest kind of exam for a committee to learn to give...[and] is unreliable as compared to a written exam.[8]

These judgments are, however, based almost entirely on observation and personal opinion with little or no evidence offered for support.

Not all comments about oral examinations are negative. Morrissett, in his survey of student attitudes, found that oral examinations are considered more pleasant and less difficult than written tests. These same students reported that they learned more but had to study harder for oral exams. In addition, they felt that orals covered more material and provided a better opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge.[9] Wrightstone, Justman, and Robbins contend that oral examinations permit the examiner to follow the thought process used by a student in answering a question.[10] Ness, in his Guide to Graduate Study, concludes that the oral examination encourages the student to review and organize his knowledge.[11] According to Kostick and Nixon, the oral mode facilitates using follow-up questions to provide a better estimate of the student's state of knowledge.[12] It permits students who misunderstand or evade a question to be "re-routed" to address the question directly. According to Halio, it also enables the examiner to estimate the student's ability to think on his feet.[13] The Chicago Board of Education gives credence to this testing mode by requiring an oral examination of teachers and administrators both for initial employment and for promotion.[14]

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Although opinions regarding oral testing abound, a dearth of empirical evidence plagues teachers who wish to acquire factual evidence. Early empirical studies on this subject generally fall into one of two categories. Research carried out at about the same time that objective testing was being developed, mostly concentrates on the administration of written examinations in the oral mode.[15] The findings of these studies support the conclusion that the two modes are generally comparable and that "...neither mode of presentation will enable every student to make his best possible showing...."[16]

The second class of early research studies contains those dealing primarily

with oral testing in graduate instruction.[17] On the basis of limited data, Trimble suggests that oral examinations are as reliable as written ones.[18] Both Trimble[19] and Pressey, and Barnes,[20] although basically critics of oral testing, conclude that the oral examination has a rightful place in graduate education.

More recently, the issue of validity and reliability of oral examinations was directly addressed. McGuire concluded that because of the poor structure, content, and administration of oral examinations, it was doubtful that they achieved all that their supporters claimed for them.[21] Later, McGuire and Babbott, studying the ability of students to solve orally - presented simulation problems reported that this technique exhibits acceptable validity and reliability.[22]

Levine and McGuire concluded that by "structuring the examinations, standardizing the case materials, training the examiners, and pooling their ratings" acceptable validity and reliability levels can be attained thus increasing, substantially, the arsenal of techniques available for assessing competencies.[23] Carter lends his support by saying:

> The evidence indicates that oral examinations, when conducted carefully and systematically, can be highly reliable. In fact, they can apparently be as reliable as our better written tests....The data suggest that in view of the low correlation with the written examination, the oral examination may have a unique function. That is, it may result in successful assessment of aspects of competence not adequately covered in the written examination.[24]

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Traditional applications of oral testing have largely been confined to graduate instruction. Such applications, for the most part, have not been innovative. In fact, in some instances, they have been retrogressive (e.g., treated more as a hurdle than as a valid tool for educational measurement).[25] However, we can infer

from the wide-spread use and common requirement of the oral examination that it is viewed as a primary instrument for evaluating graduate students. It seems strategically unreasonable to limit the use of oral examinations to graduate level instruction. If we assume that some students function better in the oral mode, as some research would suggest, a comprehensive evaluation program must include a combination of communication modalities in order to produce the most precise estimate of the student's current state of knowledge.[26] Although the testing format of graduate oral examinations may not be well suited to lower levels of instruction, creative applications of oral testing are certainly far from being exhausted.

One of the most exciting innovations in oral testing places students in the role of examiners by using student panels to evaluate the achievement of their peers. In 1965, Hartnett developed a technique for utilized student examining boards to evaluate the knowledge of their peers. Through seating arrangements, he created ten examining centers each consisting of five examiners and one examinee allowing ten students to be examined simultaneously. Students were instructed to prepare questions in advance of the test period and were then randomly assigned to serve as either examiners or respondents. Each examiner, in turn, asked one question and then immediately scored the response. Each round was permitted to continue for twenty minutes. Hartnett reports that a minimum of nine or ten questions were answered in the allotted time period. At the end of each round, students changed to new randomly assigned groups and roles. This procedure permitted sixty students to be examined during a two-hour period.[27]

Tucker, expanding upon Hartnett's paradigm, used panels of six students permitting extensive discussion and interaction between examiners and the examinee. He reported that the method was very successful and commented favorably on the apparent honesty and objectivity of the student raters.[28] Walden adds further support for the innovative use of student evaluators. She contends that the

technique not only leads to "intensive study and pursuit of knowledge," but also aids in the development of "an ethical attitude on the part of the students as they endeavor objectively and impartially to score their contemporaries."[29]

A second innovative approach holding considerable potential for enhancing the evaluation of educational outcomes is the group oral performance test. First used for officer selection by the British Army during World War II, the technique also has been used by the British Civil Service[30] and the New York City Department of Health.[31] The procedure combines group discussion techniques with oral problem solving. For example, several candidates for a position are given a problem, allowed to prepare on the topic for several days and then reassembled for a discussion-interaction session. Raters evaluate the candidate's ability to gather data, bring logic to bear on a specific problem, function harmoniously with other group members, and assume leadership. Raters observe and evaluate both knowledge and skills along with personality traits such as flexibility, adaptability, and assertiveness. Mandell lists the following chief advantages derived from the group oral testing format:

(a) A better all-round knowledge of the behavior of the candidate is obtained.

(b) The candidate's reaction will probably be more favorable than his reaction to the individual interview.

(c) No skill in questioning on the part of the raters is required.[32]

Brody and Powell support these advantages of group testing with their own independent research.[33]

A further innovative use of the oral examination is the case analysis technique used by Peterson. She reports that nursing students were shown short films and asked to comment on properly and improperly performed nursing skills. In another application, portions of simulated nurse-patient discussions were viewed and students were asked to role-play the conclusion of the discussion. Peterson

reports generally positive feedback from students who had experienced this technique despite problems caused by inadequate development of audio-visual materials.[34] While Peterson's application was to nursing education, the technique seems well suited to evaluate students' competencies in such areas as public speaking, conflict resolution, interpersonal communication, and salesmanship.

CONCLUSIONS

The preceding examination of the oral examination as an educational strategy leads to the following conclusions: (1) Critical comments about oral testing are not, for the most part, based upon empirical research but are the assertions of educational practitioners, (2) Research on oral testing has been neither systematic nor extensive. It does, however, tend to indicate that the weaknesses attributed to oral testing are not inherent in the process, (3) The value of oral examinations can be considerably enhanced by careful attention to the general principles of testing coupled with more innovative applications, and (4) Several creative oral testing strategies have been devised and successfully implemented. Student panels, group testing, and media-assisted oral examinations are examples of such creative uses.

As the demand for accountability increases, the evaluation of students must receive increased attention. Instructors must implement those techniques which will provide the most comprehensive evaluation of educational outcomes. Oral examinations merit further consideration, especially in speech communication where the oral mode is a vital element.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Giles Murrell Ruch, The Objective or New Type Examination (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1929), p. 7.

[2]Ruch, p. 8.

[3]S. L. Pressey, T. C. Pressey, and Elinor J. Barnes, "The Final Ordeal," Journal of Higher Education, 3 (1932), 263.

[4]Fred Smith and Sam Adams, Educational Measurement for the Classroom Teacher (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 6.

[5]Ann Heiss, Challenges to Graduate Schools (San Francisco: Jossey-Bess, Inc., Publisher, 1970), p. 113.

[6]Granville B. Johnson, Jr., "Selection of Questions for the Master's Oral Examination," The Journal of Teacher Education, 4 (September, 1953), 187.

[7]Jay L. Halio, "Ph.D.'s and the Oral Examination," Journal of Higher Education, 34 (March, 1963), 149.

[8]John R. Platt, "On Maximizing the Information Obtained From Science Examinations," American Journal of Physics, 29 (February, 1961), 117.

[9]Irving Morrissett, "An Experiment with Oral Examinations," Journal of Higher Education, 29 (April, 1958), 188-189.

[10]J. Wayne Wrightstone, Joseph Justman, and Irving Robbins, Evaluation in Modern Education (New York: American Book Co., 1956), p. 111.

[11]Frederic W. Ness, ed., A Guide to Graduate Study (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1960), p. 52.

[12]Max M. Kostick and Belle M. Nixon, "How to Improve Oral Questioning," Peabody Journal of Education, 30 (January, 1953), 209-210.

[13]Halio, p. 150.

[14]Richard W. Saxe, "Oral Examinations Evaluate Character, General Fitness," Chicago School Journal 44 (December, 1962), 123-127.

[15]See, for example, N. F. Stump, "Oral Versus Printed Method in the Presentation of the True-False Examination," Journal of Educational Research, 18 (December, 1928), 423-24; Harvey C. Lehman, "The Oral Versus the Mimeographed True-False," School and Society, 30 (October 5, 1929), 470-72; Milton B. Jensen, "An Evaluation of Three Methods of Presenting True-False Examinations: Visual, Oral and Visual-Oral," School and Society, 32 (November 19, 1930), 675-77; V. M. Sims and L. B. Knox, "The Reliability and Validity of Multiple-Response Tests When Presented Orally," Journal of Educational Psychology, 23 (December, 1932), 656-62; Thomas H. Briggs and George H. Armacost, "Results of an Oral True-False Test," Journal of Educational Research, 26 (April, 1933), 595-96; Robert Clark, "A True-False Test That Test," Journal of Education, 116 (September, 1933), 365-66.

[16]Lehman, p. 472.

[17]See, for example, Otis C. Trimble, "The Oral Examination: Its Validity and Reliability," School and Society, 39 (April 28, 1934), 550-52; Otis C. Trimble, "The Final Oral Examination: Its Limitations and Its Possible Improvement as a Major Academic Hurdle in Graduate School," Bulletin of Purdue University, 35 (November, 1934), 5-10; Elinor J. Barnes and S. L. Pressey, "The Reliability and Validity of Oral Examinations," School and Society, 30 (November 23, 1929), 719-22; Pressey, Pressey, and Barnes, pp. 261-64.

[18]Trimble, School and Society, p. 552.

[19]Trimble, Bulletin of Purdue University, p. 10.

[20]Pressey, Pressey, and Barnes, p. 264.

[21]Christine H. McGuire, "The Oral Examination as a Measure of Professional Competence," Journal of Medical Education, 41 (March, 1966), 274.

[22]Christine H. McGuire and David Babbott, "Simulation Technique in the Measurement of Problem-Solving Skills," Journal of Educational Measurement, 4 (Spring, 1967), 9.

[23]Harold G. Levine and Christine H. McGuire, "The Validity and Reliability of Oral Examinations in Assessing Cognitive Skills in Medicine," Journal of Educational Measurement, 7 (Summer, 1972), 72-74.

[24]Harold D. Carter, "How Reliable Are Good Oral Examinations?" California Journal of Educational Research, 13 (September, 1962), 153.

[25]See, for example, Trimble, Bulletin of Purdue University; Pressey, Pressey, and Barnes; and Halio.

[26]F. H. Goodyear and Ralph R. Behnke, "Improving Instructional Systems Through Confidence Testing," Communication Education, 25 (January, 1976), 60-67.

[27]James R. Hartnett, "Oral Examinations," Improving College and University Teaching, 13 (Autumn, 1965), 208-9.

[28]Frank H. Tucker, "Oral Examinations," Improving College and University Teaching, 16 (Summer, 1968), 188.

[29]Esther R. Walden, "Examination Experiment," Improving College and University Teaching, 20 (Autumn, 1972), 347-9.

[30]Milton M. Mandell, "The Group Oral Performance Test," Public Personal Review, 7 (1946), 209-12.

[31]William Brody and Norman J. Powell, "A New Approach to Oral Testing," Educational and Psychological Measurement, 2 (1942), 289-98.

[32]Mandell, p. 212.

[33]Brody and Powell, pp. 295-97.

[34]Carol J. Peterson, "Development of Oral Quizzes in a Multi-media Approach," Educational Technology, 14 (April, 1974), 47-51.